

STATE OF THE RIVER 2002

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Mission: "To recognize and celebrate the importance of the St. Johns River and to unite local, federal, state, and community partners in the entire St. Johns River Basin to implement vital historic, cultural, environmental, recreation, and economic initiatives."

Vision: "We will unite diverse interests, focus on shared goals, and garner new resources that will enhance our river environment and its communities."

RIVER PROFILE

The 310-mile long St. Johns River and its tributaries drain about 1/6 of the state of Florida or about 8,700 square miles. The St. Johns begins as a broad marsh at its headwaters southwest of Cape Canaveral, evolving into a series of lakes as the river broadens and flows east and north of Orlando. Hence, its original name among Native Americans was Welaka, or River of Lakes. At Palatka, the St. Johns matures into its true size and shape, averaging two miles in width for its final one hundred mile journey through Florida's largest city, Jacksonville, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean.



The upper reaches of the river contain over 280,000 acres of publicly-owned land. Many of the public lands protect the headwaters of the river, home to the endangered Snail Kite and Wood Stork. The Upper Basin Stick Marsh has for many years been one of the premier fresh-water fishing areas in the nation. The middle portions of the river include major tributaries such as the Wekiva River, the Econlockhatchee River, and major springs such as Blue Springs, Salt Springs, and Silver Springs, one of Florida's largest. The Wekiva and Econlockhatchee are designated as outstanding Florida Waterways. In the lower basin, saltwater enters the river at its mouth in Jacksonville. In periods of low river flow, tides may reverse the usual northward flow as far south as Lake Monroe, 161 miles upstream from the river's mouth. The Lower Basin is of national importance, as a layover and wintering area for migratory waterfowl, as well as home to the second largest Atlantic fleet in the United States Navy.

The first Floridians, pre-historic Native Americans, are believed to have lived along and near the river for thousands of years. The northeast portion of the basin is home to some of Florida's most significant cultural and historic resources including some of the continent's earliest military installations such as St. Augustine's Fort Matanzas and Fort Caroline in Jacksonville. After the Revolutionary War, Florida and the St. Johns became part of the United States. Jacksonville was established in 1832 under the name of Cow Ford, because at one location the river was shallow enough that settlers could "ford" their cattle. Kingsley Plantation, located on Ft. George Island near the mouth of the river and established in the 1700s, is a national historic site. After the Civil War, the St. Johns became a tourist attraction as steamboats brought tourists on excursions from Charleston and Savannah. During World Wars I and II, shipbuilding in support of the U.S. Navy was a major industry along the St. Johns. The wide breadth of river in southern Jacksonville served as a major port for seaplanes during World War II.

The St. Johns River Eco-Heritage Corridor highlights the cultural, historical, natural and outdoor recreational significance of the St. Johns River.

Goals of the corridor are to:

- *Identify a land-based corridor and a river-based "blueway" to help residents and visitors easily discover centuries of history, southern culture, wildlife and the natural beauty of the surrounding landscapes.*
- *Create materials that identify and interpret the corridor.*
- *Highlight heritage, outdoor recreation, and nature-based tourism within the St. Johns River watershed to facilitate economic growth and opportunity for the entire region while protecting area resources and community lifestyles*
- *Help create a regional identity*

Accomplishments and Resources Leveraged

A very important success of the American Heritage Rivers Initiative along the St. Johns River is the development of a river-wide network. Stakeholders representing county governments, cities, citizen groups, business organizations and recreation supporters from the length of the river are meeting, and discussing issues of concern to the river. This fact is often cited as one of the major benefits to arise from the AHR designation.

Support for the River Navigator position comes from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the River Navigator is stationed in Jacksonville.

Three projects were selected as "keystone projects" for special focus for 2002-2003:

- *Enhancement of the St. Johns River Eco-Heritage Corridor.* Goals to improve this river-length corridor are to: obtain signage for site identification, produce activity-themed brochures, enhance the website, and develop an outreach effort to inform communities about the river's wonders.
- *Development of ecotourism-related infrastructure* such as boat facilities to connect remote recreational areas, bed and breakfast facilities to house ecotourists and waste disposal/package plants for isolated recreational areas.
- *Connecting and improving trails* from various counties and state areas to form a more continuous swath of greenways for environmental enhancement and recreation.

Funding has been received and partnerships have been established for several projects:

- ◆ *Monitoring of the Lower St. Johns River.* \$240,000 from the US Geological Survey for monitoring to study water quality in sanitary nuisance areas where there were failing septic tanks.
- ◆ *Timucuan Land Acquisition.* \$2 million from the National Park Service for land acquisition of critical parcels within the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, particularly uplands most threatened by development. \$3 million from the City of Jacksonville will match these funds.
- ◆ *Preservation Project.* \$150,000 for land acquisition to support the Preservation Project and flood control efforts in Jacksonville, from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- ◆ *Volusia Heritage Trail.* Technical support from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program is being provided to develop a master plan to connect and network the county's Environmental, Cultural, Heritage and Outdoor Recreation (ECHO) assets.
- ◆ *Hogan's Creek Greenway Restoration.* The Corps of Engineers is developing a Preliminary Restoration Plan, the first step in the restoration process, in cooperation with the city of Jacksonville.
- ◆ *Lake George Restoration.* The Fish and Wildlife Service provided \$11K in matching funds for controlled burns to eliminate invasive and exotic vegetation.
- ◆ *St. Johns River Eco-Heritage Corridor.* The US EPA provided support to fund a half-time coordinator for the Corridor. Camp, Dress and McGee, Inc. provided *pro bono* resources to launch the web site for the Corridor.



Future Challenges

The communities along the St. Johns River look forward to enhancing partnerships and projects that improve the river and its communities. The following actions will assist the St. Johns River AHR Initiative to reach its full potential:

- Securing continued assistance in accessing federal administrators and federal agency programs that support the AHRI objectives
- Increasing commitment to the AHRI at all partnership levels
- Restructuring/revitalizing AHR committees to focus on key projects through implementation
- Providing full funding for existing programs that support the objectives of AHRI
- Developing new and innovative partnerships with non-traditional partners such as schools, universities and private corporations
- Developing a long-range strategic plan so that the St. Johns AHR can continue to secure funding and complete projects as current leaders move on to other challenges
- Securing funds to implement keystone projects
- Securing funds for other priority projects including water quality improvement and recreational development

Priority Areas for the St. Johns River

- Acquisition and preservation of environmentally sensitive lands
- Improvement of water quality (storm water retrofits and septic tank connections)
- Recreational development (hiking trails, park improvements, and boating access)
- Environmental restoration and protection
- Development of cultural and environmental sites and learning centers





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COMMUNITY-BASED PROCESS

The AHRI is managed by a Steering Committee consisting of the following stakeholders: the Executive Director of the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Directors of the Northeast and Central Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Districts, the Mayor of the City of Jacksonville (principal nominator of the St. Johns River application for the AHRI), a representative from each of the Advisory Committees, and representatives from the river community.

Three Advisory Committees representing the three basins of the river -- Lower, Middle and Upper -- support the Steering Committee. These committees identify needs and priorities for their respective portions of the river. The membership of these advisory committees was determined through a locally-led process, beginning with local government officials, and include representatives from environmental, business, tourism community and agricultural communities, recreation advocates, historic/cultural groups and citizens from the respective areas.

A number of federal agencies are partners in the AHRI on the St. Johns River. These include the Department of Agriculture (U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Rural Development), Department of Commerce (Economic Development Administration), Department of Defense (Army Corps of Engineers), Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of the Interior (National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Geological Survey), the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Small Business Administration. These agencies have agreed to provide technical assistance as appropriate, and to assist in identifying federal funding opportunities to support projects along the river.

